

## REPORT: ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE PRESENTATION - 29 June, 2000

Diane Wit, of the Alzheimer's Association of Central Maryland, gave a frank discussion about Alzheimer's Disease, to about 70 people at the TopOf-The-Bay, on June 29<sup>th</sup>. Ms. Wit's presentation included symptoms and stages of Alzheimer's Disease, but focused on the caregivers.

Alzheimer's is the most common cause of dementia. It is a progressive, dementing, fatal brain disease resulting in death, from total physical collapse, seven to ten years after diagnosis. In Central Maryland alone there are currently 40,000 victims of Alzheimer's Disease, a figure that is increasing as the population ages. Early Onset Alzheimer's is rare, the majority of people are stricken after age 65; 3-4% being 65-74, 18% being 75-85 and 48-50% older than 85 years of age. Neither cause nor cure is known for this disease. The three medications that have come out in the last five years, one only at the end of 1999, only slow or level off the progress of the disease.

The First (Early) Stage of Alzheimer's disease is perhaps the most important at APG personnel, because they are likely to be primary, or distant, caregivers. With an aging workforce many employees may also be concerned about themselves or colleagues. Signs of Early Alzheimer's are: recent memory loss that affects job performance; Confusion about place (gets lost on way to or from work); Loses spontaneity: spark/zest for life; Loses initiative; Mood/personality changes; Poor judgement makes bad decisions; Takes longer with routine chores; Trouble handling money. An Alzheimer victim may look the same, but act differently.

Second Stage is identified as having problem recognizing close friends and family, repetitive statements and movements, motor problems, inability to find the right words, organizing thoughts, loss of impulse control and needing fulltime supervision. In the Third Stage the victim cannot recognize family or self in mirror, loses weight, has little capacity for selfcare, cannot communicate in words, and various body systems breakdown, such as skin, bowel and bladder, immune and swallowing reflex. In the first two stages, although multiple diagnoses, Parkinson's Disease and Alzheimer's Disease, are found usually Alzheimer's patients are basically healthy and may be unusually so for their age group. Many may actually survive their care-giver, whose physical health may be worse to start with or breaks down under the stress of caring for the loved one.

Caregivers also undergo changes, feeling alone and disconnected from friends; need assistance but are reluctant to help; are often unable to do errands or complete tasks; experience stress, sometimes severe; drop usual activities and interests. Since insurance and Medicare rarely cover Alzheimer's, or other dementia diseases, the financial burden alone can be overwhelming.

Ten ways anyone can help a family affected by Alzheimer's, or other dementia diseases, are: 1. Keep in touch. 2. Do little things. 3. Give (caregiver) a break. 4. Be specific when offering assistance. 5. Be alert (know how to recognize a problem and respond). 6. Provide a change of scenery. 7. Learn to listen. 8. Care for the caregiver. 9. Remember all family members. 10. Get involved.

The Alzheimer's Association is a national organization, with international connections, whose objective is education and supportive services for families affected with Alzheimer's Disease and related disorders. Its motto is "Someone To Stand By You". The Central Maryland Chapter may be reached at 1-800-443-CARE, or you may visit the web site at <http://www.alz.org>. Ms. Wit's appearance at APG was sponsored by the APG Disability Awareness Committee.

APG Disability Awareness Committee